Learner Development in the Context of the Japanese EFL Classroom

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In the context of EFL classroom-based instruction, attitudinal and behavioral factors play a particularly important part in generating active learner involvement in the language learning process. This paper focuses on the contribution of such factors to the learner development of Japanese Freshman EFL students. It considers ways of promoting autonomous language use with students whose previous classroom experience has been predominantly that of a teacher-fronted, lock-step approach to language education. Three main areas are discussed in terms of raising learners' awareness: positive interdependence/active independence, process-oriented learning, and learner/teacher roles.

Introduction

Many educational institutions continue to explore practical ways of implementing instructional systems which promote the development and expression of learner autonomy. This is a result of the growing recognition of the importance in the language learning process of principles such as choice, responsibility and accountability for one's actions. The promotion of autonomy takes its justification from the argument that self-determination leads to intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985), and therefore, to more effective learning. So, what does *autonomy* and *autonomous language use* involve in the context of learner development in Japanese Freshman English language classrooms?

Autonomy can occur in various contexts and to varying degrees

(see Benson and Voller 1997), from learners working very independently in self-access facilities, to learners interacting in a classroom situation independent of teacher control. Littlewood (1999) has observed that due to socio-cultural influences and previous learning experiences, expectations for autonomy in Asian contexts may be very different from those in Western educational contexts. He distinguishes between *proactive* and *reactive* forms of autonomy or 'self-regulation.' Proactive autonomy involves learners establishing their own personal agenda for learning. Reactive autonomy 'does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal' (p. 75). It is this latter type, initially teacher-directed, that is more appropriate for Freshman language classes in Japan. In this context, the following autonomous learning goals can be achieved: 'the learner accepts responsibility for his or her learning' (Little 1995: 175); she/he learns 'how to function in a group and take decisions often independent of the teacher and ... how to negotiate and articulate opinions and feelings' (Legutke and Thomas 1991: 296).

In order to establish increased independence from teacher control, and increased peer interdependence, learners coming from a traditional teacher-fronted, lock-step classroom will require considerable nurturing, confidence-building and awareness-raising. A language learning environment that involves learners in the decision-making process allows greater freedom of choice. But, it also demands greater responsibility and accountability. Therefore, a systematic program of orientation is essential for learners' adjustment to this new environment. The focus of this is 'to sensitize learners to both the attitudinal and behavioral expectations required, as they move from an instructional system where the teacher directs all learning and its assessment, to one where learners participate in decisions about their own learning' (Ford & Torpey 1998: 398). The nature of such a program will depend on such factors as the learners' previous learning experiences, socio-cultural influences, the resources available, institutional demands, and the experience of the

teacher.

Most proposals for learner development, particularly in ESL, have tended to concentrate on the question of 'strategy training' in cognitive and metacognitive skills (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990). However, my focus here is on the *interpersonal*, social and interactive side of language learning rather than the *intrapersonal* (van Lier 1996). I propose fostering greater learner involvement in the learning process through raising awareness of positive interdependence/active independence, process-oriented learning and learner/teacher roles.

1. Positive Interdependence and Active Independence

The term 'positive interdependence' is often linked to Cooperative Learning (e.g. Johnson &Johnson 1992). Usually, it is used with the idea of small groups of learners working interdependently on a common goal-oriented task. Consequently, it is one way of maximizing learners' opportunities for speaking practice and fluency-building. At the same time it has an important affective value, particularly in the case of Japanese learners. Group work does not involve the pressures associated with being called on individually by the instructor, as is the case in a more teacher-fronted, whole-class scenario. Furthermore, because it encourages consensus-checking and group-mindedness, features inherent in Japanese culture, cooperative learning is something that Japanese learners tend to adapt to easily.

In establishing a cooperative framework in a communicative language classroom it is essential to develop and maintain positive peer social relations. It seems to be the case that most Japanese Freshman, given the option, will sit with the same classmate(s) in the same part of the classroom. This is usually due not only to friendships but also perceptions of belonging to certain cliques or circles determined by such factors as fashion preferences, appearances, and degree of proficiency in the L2. This is not conducive to establishing a highly interactive class, as clique formation may result in negative peer pressure: competition rather than cooperation, and possibly reluctance to participate. Thus,

the instructor must make clear early on the importance of making an effort to get to know and work with all one's classmates. Constant recombining of groups and pairs must be a feature of the early classes.

In fact, I suggest pair work rather than small group work should also be considered as the dominant pattern of interaction in the first semester. Not only does it allow more students to communicate at the same time, but it can have a very useful affective value for students who feel cautious about using their English in front of others. We must always keep in mind that for some of these students it really is the first time they have been pushed to use the language communicatively. Working in pairs appears to be a much more comfortable form of interaction for Japanese students in the early part of a course than group work. Allwright & Bailey (1991: 164) have pointed to the problem of 'communication apprehension' in the language classroom. That is, where some learners are naturally reluctant to communicate, even in their L1, and prefer to take the role of passive listener. Teachers need to be sensitive to this issue. While rationalizing the need to practice oral skills, instructors should give learners as much opportunity as possible to do this out of the public eye as they steadily adapt to the classroom's communicative demands.

Another important aspect of developing positive interdependence is the sharing of a common classroom 'culture' (Breen 1985). To promote high levels of interaction, participation and autonomous language use, learners must get the sense that they all have an investment and a part to play in that culture, sharing its rules, attitudes and types of behavior. In this way they will come to feel comfortable in interacting with their peers in the L2. The importance of the socialization process cannot be underestimated, as inherent in the rationale behind promoting cooperation and interdependence in the language classroom is the view that social interaction is the driving force behind interlanguage development. It is, as van Lier notes, 'the 'engine' that drives the learning process' (1996: 145).

In addition to developing interdependence and positive social rela-

tions, learners also need to make a transition from the passive and teacher-dependent role—which the majority of Japanese high school learners have experienced—to one of active independence. This is fundamental to the way learners will perceive their future contributions and responsibilities in the language learning process. As one learner commented, reflecting an increasing awareness of accepting such a role in a more autonomous learning environment, 'We have to move by ourselves in this class.' So, what does this 'moving by ourselves' actually involve? In terms of learner activity, increasing independence can be recognized by such hallmarks as learner-initiated interaction, willingness to interact in the target language both in and out of the instructor's earshot, volunteering, willingness to undertake spontaneous communication, active and willing involvement in group formation, and seeking teacher advice when needed. We must remember that these learners have been used to being told what to do, how and when, rather than using their own initiative, and so they must be steadily nurtured in the right direction for them to make this transition.

2. Process-oriented language learning

Michael Lewis has defined *process* as 'a developing, dynamic concept. In this it contrasts with the static nature of product' (1993: 18). It involves organization, planning, discussing and negotiating how to get things done. Lewis points to the link of product-process to the teaching-learning dichotomy, suggesting learning is process-oriented: 'it is cognitive involvement, struggling, trying, hypothesizing, revising, and other activities of this kind which are the basis of learning' (p. 18). In a process-oriented classroom learners will be involved cooperatively working on real-world tasks, project work, contributing input and ideas, and on language development as an ongoing process of self-discovery. They need to realize that they will be using the L2 for genuine communication rather than seeing it as an end product. Learners will be developing linguistic, social and procedural skills.

A process-oriented classroom is likely to be a sharp contrast to the

experience of the vast majority of Japanese high school students. As a means of getting first-hand impressions and experiences of learners' high school education, Ford (1997) interviewed sixty Freshman after one year of process-oriented learning, and asked them to compare it to their previous language learning experiences. Though there was some genuine variety of experience, the overwhelming reaction to high school English classes was negative, the general picture being one of a traditional, teacher-fronted, lock-step classroom with the medium of instruction being Japanese, the focus of attention being grammatical structure and translation to the L1. Activities were limited primarily to in-class reading and vocabulary list learning, with a distinct lack of pair and group work. This situation is on the whole maintained by a system of education that continues to put major emphasis on examinations above all other educational considerations. The language learning of these students was thus highly product-oriented. As one interviewee pointed out: 'In our high school days I studied for the exams and so that after the exam we forgot what we learned ... because it's the ... err ... it's the study for the exam, but now I study for my life.' This comment clearly shows recognition of the restrictive nature of a product-oriented style of teaching and learning that the speaker experienced at high school, and a growing awareness of language learning as part of a life-long ongoing process.

In terms of language development, learners in a process-oriented classroom should be encouraged to follow an observe-hypothesize-experiment language learning paradigm (Lewis 1993). This encourages a self-discovery attitude to language learning, and as such it contrasts with the more traditional present-practice-produce paradigm that is teacher-controlled and based on a prescriptive graded linguistic syllabus. It should be remembered that our learners have already experienced such a syllabus during their previous six years of language education. Learners should now be encouraged as much as possible to experiment in their language use and to feel free to make mistakes when developing fluency is emphasized.

Indeed, emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy is a key aspect of process-oriented language learning. These learners have been used to focusing on form and accuracy at the expense of developing their floency of speech. This imbalance needs to be redressed with learners given plenty of opportunities to use the target language creatively and spontaneously without the restrictions of practicing grammatical or functional items predetermined by an externally imposed syllabus. However, this should not imply a complete desertion of form-focused study, but it should be more learner-centred. Learners should be encouraged to look at their own weaknesses through self-correction, monitoring, taping interactions, and other communicative grammar activities such as 'dictogloss' (Wajnryb 1990). In fact, when done in the L2 cooperatively these activities can combine both meaning and form, and therefore a dual focus on fluency and accuracy.

Another important process aspect of language development is the need to understand the importance of using the target language as medium of classroom communication. Being involved in real-world tasks and group negotiation learners must develop the willingness to struggle to extend their interlanguage and vocabulary, and not just fall back on their L1 when communication becomes difficult. Often, in language classrooms learners use the L2 orally only for pedagogic tasks such as information exchange gaps and prescribed dialogues. Learners need to realize the importance of using the L2 for pragmatic, real-world communication as well. As Little, following Swain, argues, 'all learners must strive to express meanings in the target language if their communicative competence is to develop' (1995: 177). Of course, this kind of demand is very difficult for learners whose previous experience in using the target language for the purposes of oral communication has been extremely limited, a result of a teaching methodology which places far greater emphasis on language usage rather than use. In addition, most high school language classes appear to be conducted in the L1. A transition to an English-only policy is understandably difficult but should not be balked in favor of easier options. Learners should be

trained in the use of communication strategies such as clarification and reformulation in order to help maintain their use of the L2. Along with other process-oriented criteria, willingness to stay in the L2 should make a major contribution to learners' participation grading.

3. Learner/teacher roles

There are two key areas where learners need to make a transition regarding learner/teacher roles in an autonomous language learning environment: mode of interaction and method of assessment.

Most Japanese high school classes, and traditional FL classes, are conducted with an IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) type of interaction, with the teacher seen as source of knowledge and controller of proceedings. Van Lier (1996: 156) summarizes this type of interaction as follows:

> the IRF sequence, while it is effective in maintaining order, regulating participation, and leading students in a certain predetermined direction, often reduces the student's initiative, independent thinking, clarity of expression, the development of conversational skills (including turn taking, planning ahead, negotiating and arguing), and self-determination.

Clearly, this pattern of interaction is not appropriate for developing learners' autonomous language use. With learners making the transition to working more independently and interdependently they need to get used to a very different form of learner/instructor relationship. That is, one where the instructor relates to learners in small groups rather than from the front of the class in a transmission mode of instruction. They must come to recognize the instructor as resource, facilitator, and counselor who is there to assist and advise but not to intervene and threaten the independent/interdependent interaction of the group. In terms of the instructor's own role perception the key is recognition of the move away from grammatical knowledge to manage-

ment skills and creating ripe conditions for communicative language use.

In managing this change, one of the main challenges for the instructor is to create a learning environment and classroom culture where learners feel comfortable, confident and relaxed about seeking teacher advice and assistance, and about initiating this interaction whenever required. This may involve seeking teacher opinions, advice on grammar and vocabulary, advice on management tasks. Learners must be clear about the fact that learner independence should not mean less teacher contact time but actually more time spent interacting in small groups with their instructor. They must not feel they are being deserted but that there is support and advice at hand. In a fully functioning learner-centred classroom of autonomous language users the instructor will be constantly in demand as groups are regularly calling for advice and offering progress checks.

The degree to which this needs to be made clear, and consistently underlined as part of the classroom culture, will depend on socio-cultural factors and past language learning experiences. Many students —certainly in the context of Japanese education—will not even feel comfortable at first about calling their teacher by name, especially in front of others. Others may think they are being a nuisance, showing a lack of knowledge, or of demonstrating a failure to be able to work independently of the teacher. All of these doubts need to be addressed in individual counseling if necessary. Of course, cooperative interdependence can ease many of these problems, learners having discussed the question before referring to the teacher. If the teacher is to drop back to the periphery of interaction rather than be at its pivotal centre, then she/he must not constantly intervene to check on progress or to be seen nudging along the interaction of the group. If the teacher is seen to be constantly checking on groups this will weaken the long-term independence and interdependence of the group for the sake of short-term goals. At the same time, in order to encourage seeking teacher advice, at the outset of such a program, it should, like the other factors I have

mentioned in this paper, be made an aspect of grading participation.

The second area where learners and instructors take on new roles is that of assessment. I have mentioned earlier that responsibility and accountability are key aspects of autonomy, and learner self-assessment is an important part of this. As Gremmo and Riley suggest, 'Self-assessment is vital to the act of learning and has to be as accurate, thorough and relevant as possible: learners must learn to self-assess realistically' (1995: 155). Also, I believe self-assessment needs to be qualitative rather than quantitative in order to involve genuine reflection. It should not be limited to filling in a set of numbers related to vague descriptions of performance like *poor, average, good, excellent* etc. in order to produce convenient scores. It is in the actual process of coming up with their own comments where learners will need to genuinely reflect on their learning, attitude and motivation. At the outset the instructor will need to establish assessment criteria which underline the relevant attitudinal and behavioral transitions that the learners are undertaking. However, these should be seen as a stepping stone to learners developing their own self-assessment criteria and procedures.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined three key areas where Japanese Freshman language learners need awareness-raising in terms of attitudinal and behavioral aspects of the language learning process. I suggest that these should be promoted in two ways. First, they should be presented at the outset to learners as explicit objectives with learners being given a general introduction to the instructional system and its rationale. Second, learners should be involved in implicit orientation activities that aim to exemplify these requirements. Throughout the course there should be a review of its rationale and constant evaluation by learners and instructors. In this way, learners will be involved in a systematic process of explanation, awareness-raising, understanding, and willingness to participate as they move towards developing greater autonomy in their use of the L2.

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